

Sherry Roush and Cristelle L. Baskins, eds. *The Medieval Marriage Scene: Prudence, Passion, Policy*. MRTS, 2005. pp. xv + 168.

Research on marriage has produced some of the most fruitful work on the medieval period in recent decades. Studies of marriage have broadened our perceptions of gender relations, the role and status of women in medieval society, political alliances, religious devotion, chivalry, and patronage of the arts, and many more facets of medieval life. After three decades, one might be inclined to suggest that enough has been said on the subject. This volume capably demonstrates that that is not the case. Sherry Roush and Cristelle Baskins have brought together some of the most well-known authorities in this field (among others, John Baldwin, Konrad Eisenbichler, Dyan Elliott, Barbara Hanawalt, Jenny Jochens, Frederik Pedersen, Susan Mosher Stuard) to present their latest research. While not all of these essays challenge preconceived notions of the marital state in the Middle Ages, as its editors

assert, nonetheless, many of the works in this volume do.

Dyan Elliott, for example, revises current thinking about the Lollards' approach to marriage, arguing that Lollards attempted to undermine traditional bonds between women and clergy by elevating women's protected place in marriage, rather than experimenting with gender roles, as they have so frequently been accused of doing. Similarly, Barbara Hanawalt demonstrates the independence of London widows and the influence they had in creating meaningful horizontal ties through remarriage. Perhaps more importantly, several of the contributions look at groups of people or subjects often forgotten yet in desperate need of research. Ronald Surtz's analysis of a Spanish "Margery Kempe," highlights an area of Europe often ignored in studies by English authors. Similarly, Cristelle Baskins' discussion

of wedding chests sporting scenes from the *Tale of Saladin* and *Torello* not only informs us about Florentine wedding customs, but it also gives us a much better sense of popular notions of Muslims in post-crusade Europe.

Undoubtedly one of the most absorbing articles in the volume, Judith Baskin's "Medieval Jewish Models of Marriage," highlights a people overlooked in most studies of marriage. Baskin ambitiously offers a comparative study of medieval Jews in both Christian and Muslim milieus, underscoring the differences in customs, personal freedoms, and the legal rights of Jewish women, in particular, within both environments. Despite the overriding influence of scripture in regulating Jewish marital practice, Baskin traces a number of intriguing cultural influences and distinctions. For example, many readers will be fascinated to learn that the breaking of the glass at Jewish weddings was a popular custom in the Christian Rhineland before it was incorporated into the Jewish wedding ceremony, and that Jewish women in medieval

Christendom were permitted the use of a contraceptive, a cervical sponge, in order to engage in marital intercourse without fears of pregnancy. Baskin's work, with any luck, will kindle interest in scholars to go further with this work and expand our knowledge of medieval Jewish lives.

Similarly, Jenny Jochens' "Germanic Marriage: The Case of Medieval Iceland," delves into uncharted waters, providing a succinct discussion of the differences between pagan and Christian marriages in medieval Iceland, highlighting in particular the limits of Christian legislation in its control over Iceland. With so little evidence on early Germanic marriage in either the Anglo-Saxon context or on the Continent, Jochens' hypothesis that the Icelandic evidence may well provide a pan-Germanic model of marriage customs is problematic. Certainly none of her evidence conflicts with existing continental or Anglo-Saxon traditions as they are known to us. In the absence of more extensive documentation, however, it is impossible to prove whether she is correct

in assuming the representative nature of Icelandic traditions. Jochens is certainly aware of the limitations of her hypothesis and voices this concern in her article; yet, her work strongly suggests that there is much value for European historians in acquiring a greater awareness of medieval Icelandic culture.

Susan Mosher Stuard's innovative work, "Marriage Gifts and Fashion Mischief," examines a subject that is often ignored in medieval studies: fashion. Focusing on the transition in Lombard society from dowries in kind to cash endowments, Stuard uncovers a group of wives desperate to flaunt their style despite their husbands' attempts to economize by limiting gifts of clothing at marriage and refining women's sumptuary legislation. The result was a battle between elegantly-dressed husbands and their equally elegantly-dressed wives who had to resort to calling buttons "beads" and turning their homes into dress-making factories. Stuard also makes it clear that this first dalliance with the world of fashion is not trivial. Quoting Fernand Braudel, she notes "without [fashion]

nothing would have changed so fast" (184). The transition from marriage gifts to cash endowments lays the base for a fashion industry that was the key to capitalist development.

Unfortunately, not all the articles in this collection are on such solid ground. In her "The Old and the Feckless: Fabliau Husbands," Elizabeth Poe demands a revision of the fabliaux and our understanding of its intended audience. Quite convincingly, she demonstrates that the fabliaux were not simply slapstick comedies to entertain the mindless masses; rather, they addressed a wide number of sophisticated debates on the subject of marriage, from the conjugal debt to impotence as grounds for a divorce. Despite such a strong premise, Poe does much damage to her argument by concluding that the fabliaux present only a "slightly exaggerated representation of the world in which we live" (133). After recounting story after story of absurd situational comedies in which mice are mistaken for mobile vaginas and priests copulate with parishioners atop a human pyramid, the argument that this

is just a "slightly exaggerated" reality is hard to buy. A number of other articles simply do not uphold the high standards of this collection. Articles by Priscilla Bawcutt ("Women Talking about Marriage in William Dunbar and Hans Sachs"), Konrad Eisenbichler ("At Marriage End: Girolamo Savonarola and the Question of Widows in Late Fifteenth-Century Florence"), and Frederik Pedersen ("Counsel and Consent: Preparing for Marriage Litigation According to the Fourteenth-Century York Cause Papers") simply fail to present any evidence that would seem to be new.

Perhaps the greatest flaw in this volume is the editors' failure to insist that authors make their work accessible to the reader. This is most apparent in the inconsistency of translations. Some authors (Baskin and Eisenbichler, for example) consistently translate terminology for the readers; most others did not. Given that the sources come from a broad spectrum of languages (French, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, Middle English, Middle Scots, Old Icelandic, and Spanish), the

absence of reliable translations certainly restricts the audience who might fully appreciate this work and will prevent many instructors from assigning these works to their classes (a serious flaw, considering the growing numbers of classes dedicated to the study of marriage and women in the medieval context).

These reservations aside, *The Medieval Marriage Scene* promises to contribute much to current studies of medieval marriage and will undoubtedly spark new directions in research.

Sara Butler
Loyola University